

THE WRETCHED LITTLE DEMON THAT WAS HITLER

He Possessed the "Mass Soul" of the Third Reich

HERBERT LUETHY

IS THE abomination that was Adolf Hitler ripe for the judgment of history?

For the moment, the stream of material on him, mostly cheap journalism and gossip, that began pouring forth in Germany after 1945, seems to be drying up; even the most sensational "memoirs" are almost all behind us. And now we have two serious, painstaking, and richly documented biographies issued almost simultaneously, one by an Oxford historian, Alan Bullock, and the other by two Germans, Walter Görlitz and H. A. Quint.* It is a curious experience to read both books together. The same facts and actions are presented, from the same sources, and they lead to the same ineluctable "moral." Yet the tone and attitude of the two books could not be more different.

NOT surprisingly, the Oxford historian maintains a detachment of which Hitler's German biographers are incapable. His book, for this reason, has a precision and

THE "enigma" of Hitler continues to hold the attention of those at least whose memories are longer than the average. If Hitler remains an enigma it is not because of his personality as such; rather because that personality, in all its ineffable tawdriness, was so incommensurate with the events it set in motion. HERBERT LUETHY, a regular contributor to these pages, raises the problem anew on the occasion of the appearance of two full-scale biographies of Hitler, and an English translation of a selection from his recorded "table talk"; and he focuses particularly on the impulse of the German biographers to find still some element of "greatness" in the "Führer." Mr. Luethy was born and brought up in Switzerland, and is a literary critic as well as political commentator, his latest book being on Montaigne. His last appearance in COMMENTARY was in January 1953, with an article on the contemporary developments tending toward a united Europe. The present article was translated from the German by Irving Pfefferblit.

unity which their flickering, indistinct, and somewhat lurid portrait lacks. The ghost of the "Führer" still haunts Görlitz and Quint—and they shudder at it in a curious way. We seem to hear them exclaiming at each new turn of events: "What a monster!" or: "Still—what a man!" The exclamation marks they punctuate every second or third sentence with make them sound as if they were trying to make sure the reader felt the "appropriate" emotions. "He opened his heart to no one! Even now there was no friend to whom he trusted himself unreservedly, there was no woman who could have boasted that she ruled him. He feared nothing so much as that. He hid his innermost mystery in absolute darkness until his death!"

Yet in their style and attitude, as well as in their susceptibility to dime-novel "demonism," Görlitz and Quint are unquestionably closer to Hitler than Bullock. This may make their book not only more palatable to German readers but, in an odd, ambiguous way, truer to life insofar as it more closely reflects the atmosphere in which Hitler himself moved. The way Bullock writes about Hitler is perhaps not really possible yet for Germans living in Germany. It's the way a historian would write about Tutankhamen or Nebuchadnezzar—testing his data by traditional standards of evidence, refraining almost completely from judgments, and, above all, trying always to distinguish between opinion and fact—which the two German biographers tend constantly to jumble.

Darkness lies over the first thirty years of Hitler's life, for which we have only a few raw, impersonal facts and some thin, late, and contradictory legends, in part constructed by Hitler himself and in part dutifully propagated by others; but Bullock gives objectively both the darkness and the legends,

**Hitler, A Study in Tyranny*. Harper. 776 pp. \$6.00; *Adolf Hitler, Eine Biographie*. Stuttgart. Steingrüben-Verlag. 656 pp.

even down to the unlikeliest minutiae. Hitler tells in *Mein Kampf* how as a little boy in Leonding he was always the leader when playing at war with the other boys, and a few old neighbors are supposed later—decades after the event, when Hitler was already great and powerful and such memories were worth their weight in gold—to have confirmed this. “Yes, we remember. What a daredevil that Hitler was!” Was he really? Görlitz and Quint write: “On the hill opposite the Leonding church, and in the meadow behind the family house, the village children played at Boers and Englishmen. Hitler led the Boers, and the English were beaten!” Bullock notes dryly: “He has been described as the natural leader of the children in their games—which may or may not be true.” This is the difference between a history and a biographical novel.

THERE are even more significant differences between the two books. Every time the Nazis perpetrate a crime, Görlitz and Quint fall prey to tormenting doubts: did the “Führer” himself know about it? The Reichstag fire, for instance—it came at just the right time, a real gift from the gods, it was exploited “with lightning swiftness” to suspend all constitutional freedoms and create an atmosphere of terror. The official explanation of the new Nazi regime, that it was a Communist plot, was a fabrication from beginning to end, but *concocted with genius*, according to Görlitz and Quint, who also write that “the suspicion exists” that the SA “had a hand in the game,” and even raise the “insoluble question, still, of when Goering noticed that not everything about this act of arson was open and aboveboard . . . something that the party state could naturally never admit!” So Görlitz and Quint are left *in doubt*. The Nazi putsch in Austria and the murder of Chancellor Dollfuss? Hitler “dissociated himself” from these acts “in the sharpest possible manner”—“lightning quick.” The mass murders of June 30, 1934? In this exceptional case, to be sure, Hitler himself led a murder squad, but “Hitler sincerely believed then, we must grant him, that the SA intended a putsch.” This “we must grant him” is worth a whole library.

There is no question here, however, of special pleading. That it was the spirit of Hitler himself that engulfed Germany, and

later Europe, is stressed over and over by the two German authors—but we have been transported imperceptibly from the level of personality to that of “spirit,” where things are less crude and no longer reek of blood. And if the source and origin of these events is historically perfectly clear, Görlitz and Quint are nevertheless quite right from a legal point of view: there is no documentary evidence—it was in every case carefully destroyed, the witnesses, most of them, along with it—and throughout his life Hitler trusted himself just as little to paper as he did to any human being. Nothing can be proved about Hitler, for good or for evil, from his birth to his death.

Nothing personal can be proved against him—and nothing personally meaningful either. He spoke in clichés and “eternal verities,” literally “like a book,” always alone, always holding a pose—before conversational partners as before audiences. The man who stamped his image on a whole epoch—an epoch that resembled him anyhow—had no image himself: only a mask, stuck together out of a mustache and a forelock, which he hid in his hands whenever he laughed, because laughter did not fit with the stance of wild energy that he maintained so fiercely. The poor devil from Leonding, the unsuccessful high school student of Linz, the unsuccessful bohemian of Vienna, down and out, without home or family, without profession or calling, and soon, indeed, stateless, without wife, sweetheart, friend, or comrade, finally rose in the world: through politics, the ideal vocation of the vocationless, of the man who concerns himself with what does not concern him, and can devote unlimited time to it because he himself has nothing that concerns him personally; who, for lack of a destiny of his own, becomes the master of the destiny of his society, and who can wrap himself so tightly in a pose because he possesses nothing else. And yet, on the heights of power, Hitler remained the same poor devil. In the very center of mighty events set in motion from that center itself, there stood a being of almost inconceivable spiritual, moral, and human inferiority.

IT is understandable enough that Hitler's political opponents should always have seen him, until it was too late, as a mere tool, whether of the Reichswehr, the Junkers,

or heavy industry. It was an error; he was no tool, even if his entire career is unthinkable without the scheming officers of the post-1918 German army, who set him loose on Germany as a nationalist agitator and information agent; or without the dark ferment of Bavarian conspiracies, beer-hall putschists, vigilante tribunals, and the Freikorps; or without the protection and complicity of highly placed "nationalist" politicians, from the Munich police commissioner and a Bavarian minister of justice to the Ludendorff clique and the "black Reichswehr," under whose protection this promoter of riots, organizer of meeting-hall brawls, and putschist, who did not even become a German citizen until 1932, remained safe from punishment or deportation; or without the Kahrs, Thyssens, Hugenberg, and Papens, who thought they could use him as a "drummer boy."

But not only Hitler's enemies, also those who came to terms with him made the mistake of regarding him as a mere tool. "The history of Hitler is the history of his underestimation," observes Veit Valentin, in his *History of the Germans*—and he is quoted approvingly by Görlitz and Quint. They seek to avoid that error.

But what was it that was underestimated in Hitler? Wherein did his power lie? "Every single one of his ideas," Bullock notes, "from the exaltation of the heroic leader, the racial myth, anti-Semitism, the community of the *Volk*, and the attack on the intellect, to the idea of a ruling elite, the subordination of the individual and the doctrine that might is right, is to be found in anti-rational and racist writers (not only in Germany but also in France and other European countries) during the hundred years which separate the Romantic movement from the foundation of the Third Reich. By 1914 they had become the stale commonplaces of radical anti-Semitic and pan-German journalism and café-talk in every city in Central Europe. . . .

"Hitler's originality lay not in his ideas, but in the terrifying literal way in which he set to work to translate fantasy into reality, and his unequalled grasp of the means by which to do this. To read Hitler's table talk at his headquarters in 1941-1942 is to feel continual astonishment at the lack of magnanimity and wisdom in his conversation, the main qualities of which were cunning

and brutality, a cocksure ignorance and an ineradicable vulgarity. Yet this vulgarity of mind, like the insignificance of his appearance, the badly fitting raincoat and the lock of hair plastered over his forehead, was perfectly compatible with brilliant political gifts. Accustomed to associate such gifts with the qualities of intellect which a Napoleon or a Bismarck possessed, or with the strength of character of a Cromwell or a Lincoln, we are astonished and offended by this combination. Yet to underestimate Hitler as a politician, to dismiss him as an hysterical demagogue, is to make precisely the mistake that so many Germans made in the early 1930's."

THE danger of underestimating him no longer seems very great. Even those who once found this black-haired apostle of the blond Aryan hero comic have long since stopped laughing. "If you would see his monument, look around." And, all things considered, it was not primarily an error of underestimation that the German people committed as regards Hitler. On the contrary. The problem Hitler's German biographers struggle with is quite different: how to reconcile the gravity, the catastrophic magnitude of the events, with the vulgar mediocrity of the individual who initiated them; and, if not to explain this, at least to make it conceivable how a great and civilized nation could identify itself with a spiritually and morally retarded being. Their constant harping on the necessity of taking Hitler seriously is the measure of their failure in this. What kind of biography is it that halts its narrative every few pages to insist that there really is something to the man it depicts, even if it is impossible to discern just what it is?

Often the effort to "take Hitler seriously" becomes grotesque. Thus Görlitz and Quint say, in connection with Hitler's early rejection of Marx and Marxism, that he had undoubtedly read not Marx himself but, at most, "pamphlets about or against Marxism." But a few pages later—after voicing their own commonplace notions about the place of Marxism in the philosophy of history—they note ponderously that "Hitler, however, rejected it [Marxism] not so much from the standpoint of pure historical theory as from that of racism, as 'Jewish science'. . . . By so doing, he, unquestionably one of the most important of anti-Marxists, turned the tables

on it, and in exchange made the racial interpretation of history by his own act a universally valid absolute." The reader groans at this point. All this man, who was "unquestionably" one of the most important of anti-Marxists, knew about Karl Marx, that great and genuinely difficult thinker, he knew by hearsay—that is, that he was a Jew. And he "refuted" the Marxist analysis of society and its critique of history with "Death to the Jew!"—"not so much," therefore, "from the standpoint of pure historical theory." The superstition that tremendous historical events have to have spiritual, high-minded causes—that a man who greatly affected the destiny of nations must needs himself be great—here reaches its ultimate effect in a monstrous confusion of values and categories.

WHAT seems to be the insuperable difficulty incurred by both these conscientious biographies of Hitler is to find the category of historical greatness into which to fit him. "Greatness" itself is unquestionable, for Hitler's "greatness" left as its monument one of the greatest shambles in history; nothing more is required to put a man in the schoolbooks, and a great deal has gone into history, from the arsonist of Ephesus to the Capitoline geese. Moreover, Hitler's public role is well known, the available sources for the history of National Socialism are richer than those for most other epochs of history. But this contributes very little to his personal biography; in the face of "Hitler the man," the verifiable sources dry up, the image grows cloudy, all the outlines of an articulated personality disappear. How every reality of Hitler, the man, resists all efforts to lend him greatness!

The greatest advantage these new biographies of Hitler have over the one written by Konrad Heiden in the 1930's, which still has its value today and is hardly surpassed for the period it covers, is in their last chapters, which cover events Heiden did not yet have the chance to observe. In Bullock's book, the last chapter is entitled "The Emperor without His Clothes," and tells about the madhouse that was Hitler's bunker in April 1945: the widening gap between Hitler's private world and reality; his last months as Supreme War Commander; his operations with phantom armies; his wild commands, issued into the void, for offensives, dismissals,

death sentences; his insane outbursts against anyone who wanted to halt the collective suicide of Germany. Long before this, Hitler had uttered the following sentence (variations of which recur over and over in his conversation) in his last public speech in Munich on November 9, 1943—a sentence hurriedly expunged from the official versions: "I will not mourn for the German people if they fail this test. . . ."

This, its final stage, made his whole career all the more inconceivable. How did this mythomaniac acquire the power to force his delusions on reality for so many years, and make a whole nation follow him so obediently into the abyss?

Bullock finds Hitler's place in history "alongside Attila the Hun, the barbarian king who was surnamed not the Great, but the Scourge of God," and Görlitz and Quint, with the cautious reservation that "it is not for us to make the final historical judgment," come to the same conclusion. But this all too convenient parallel can, at best, do justice only to the external scale of the catastrophe, not to Hitler's personality. Whatever he was, there was nothing primitive, natural, or elemental about him, nothing of the uncomplicated barbarism of a nomad chief. To see him as a wild, unchained force of nature is to fall for his own pose. This "Scourge of God" fell upon Europe not out of the steppes but from the Viennese gutter.

What is missing from both biographies is the peculiar, penetrating smell—"demoniacally" thrilling to some, repellent to others—that the whole Nazi movement exhaled in the years of its ascendancy. No one thinks of the category "genius" in connection with Attila or Genghis Khan; with Hitler it is impossible to avoid the word, which in almost every language other than German can denote the bad as well as the good, the highest as well as the lowest spirit that can possess men—or swine. And unsatisfactory as is that demonology which takes over the task of explaining what the rational understanding still cannot, it unquestionably comes closer to the phenomenon of Hitler than the notion of barbarism. "Schicklgruber, possessed by demons"—as unspeakably vulgar as it sounds, that is the correct starting point. Not Attila, but the villain of a *Dracula*-type thriller best approximates Hitler as a historical figure; his band of "old fighters"—that chosen col-

lection of pederasts, drug addicts, rowdies, crackpots, and criminals—belong with some nest of vampires rather than a barbarian horde.

HISTORIANS do not want to descend to the level of popular magazines, of scandal and sensation; they are used to other references. But how else can they reach Adolf Hitler's level? It is hard for history to move on a higher plane than its subject, and everything private in Hitler's life is doubtful, sordid, or disreputable.

The problem presents itself on the first page of every biography of Hitler. "On the 6th of June, 1876, there appeared before the notary in Weitra-an-der-Lainsitz, in the department of Gmund in Lower Austria, an eighty-four-year-old former miller named Johann Georg Hiedler, who, in the presence of three witnesses . . . declared that the customs officer Alois Schicklgruber, born out of wedlock on June 17, 1837, in Strones, to the serving-maid Anna Maria Schicklgruber, whom he [Hiedler] had married in 1842, was his own and the said serving-maid's natural son. . . ." Alois Schicklgruber was forty years old, had already been married and divorced, and had two children by his cook when he was thus legitimized. Johann Hiedler had married Alois's mother thirty-five years before, but had not bothered then to recognize his illegitimate son, and never bothered about him after his wife's death five years later. Furthermore, he, Hiedler, dropped out of sight during the intervening thirty years. It was the sort of thing that often happened among peasants.

Alan Bullock tactfully ignores the whole thing: what has it got to do with the case? Yet it is pertinent that the apostle of the myth of race, who made blood origin the sole criterion of humanity, did not really know who his own grandfather was. It is equally pertinent that the son of the Jewish family in Graz by whom Anna Maria Schicklgruber was employed at the time of her confinement contributed to the support of her son Alois for twenty years—the Alois who was Hitler's father, and whom Hitler hated with a hatred he could not hide even in *Mein Kampf*, with a hatred that led him to rebel against all authority, all discipline, and every ordered way of life, and decided him upon his abortive "artistic career." And it is also pertinent

that a ragged Viennese postcard-painter, Adolf Hitler, in an old black, knee-length coat a secondhand dealer had given him, with long black hair and sparse unshaven beard, really looked exactly the way he later, in *Mein Kampf*, described "the Jew in a caftan" whose sight had such a traumatic effect upon him. Those who have tried to come to grips with Hitler's "doctrine" were long ago struck by the fact that he always projected his own image upon those he hated and excoriated. We will build no theory on this, and we also prefer to leave his hidden origins hidden.

But what's the use, then, of the genealogical tables that Görlitz and Quint print, only, finally, to "concede" what is obvious anyway, that "in Adolf Hitler's physiognomy very little of German ancestry is to be seen"? This is taking a tone too lofty for the subject. The *homo alpinus*, with his black lock of hair over a slanting forehead, flanked by his little Mephisto Goebbels, as herald of the Nordic hero—only naked horror blinds us to the ludicrousness of this burlesque-hall act. Does *everything* about Hitler really have to be "taken seriously" because his Reich cost twenty-five million lives?

BUT we do not need gossip, revelations, or explanations of the "Geli Raubal affair," or the intimate diaries of Eva Braun, to clear up Hitler's case. His true, authorized, and incontestable portrait was painted by himself in *Mein Kampf* and no biography, however painstaking and conscientious, can replace the reading of that book for anyone seeking to grasp his personality. *Mein Kampf*, which was once thrust into almost every German's hands, seems to have been read by few, and to the end by even fewer.

That the book teems with gross untruths and even worse half-truths does not prevent it from mirroring the spiritual personality of its author with alarming if involuntary truthfulness. Nor does it matter that it depicts the external circumstances of Hitler's career with vague, obliterating, or self-glorifying strokes—about the first thirty years of his life Hitler juggled with one contradictory and obviously untenable version after another, until in the *Reichshandbuch der Deutschen Gesellschaft* the notice he himself wrote states that, as the "descendant of an Austrian family of finance officials," he "de-

voted himself to architecture" during his youth in Vienna, and in 1912 moved to Munich "in order to find a wider field for his political activity." Even the style, decked out with stilted flourishes and padded with verbiage, distends itself as it spreads its sorry "world view," like a peacock's tail, over 800 pages. But the spirit expressed in this ideological portrait of himself is his own, unmistakable amid all the rubbish.

MANY of the questions that his biographers wrestle with disappear as soon as we go to *Mein Kampf*. All the deliberations and conjectures about his education, the "enormous reading" of his bohemian period in Vienna, then become meaningless. Did he read Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Mommsen, Le Bon, Gobineau, Chamberlain, Haeckel? We do not know; Hitler himself avoided every mention of the names of all the authors he supposedly had read. The few shopworn quotations from great writers that sprinkle his writings and speeches were on every tongue, and could have come to him at fourth or fifth hand. He took from everything—as he noted complacently—what suited him.

As sole "philosophic" foundation, sufficient alike for stockbreeding, the animal kingdom, and the life of nations, he had a primitive biological Darwinism, expressed in pseudo-scientific vulgarizations. He showed an abysmal lack of understanding of anything having to do with society, morality, government, civilization, or religion—in short, of anything human higher than the pack. His knowledge of the world was that of a village grumbler whose information was all got from the local newspaper. And under all this there lay an arbitrary belief in force such as required no extensive reading to attain—but with which one could go far. This is the whole intellectually graspable content of Hitler's picture of the world.

For long stretches that picture is nothing but the blustering of a barroom debater who knows how to do everything better because he doesn't know how to do anything. Yet, though—or precisely because—Hitler had little systematic understanding of any question involving factors more complicated than those of force or cunning, ideas occurred to him such as seldom occur to serious statesmen and diplomats because they are excluded by experience or respect for the rules of the

game. The Gordian knot and Columbus's egg are standing examples of the fact that the simplest solution of a difficult problem is always by force and cunning—stand an egg on end by breaking it, and untie a knot by cutting it. It is not a difficult trick, anybody can do it; but it is successful because nobody else does do it. However, such success seldom outlasts the effect of its surprise. Adolf Hitler went from one stupendous triumph to another, making German and then world history, until all the eggs were broken and all the knots cut—then, to his amazement, the others, "those idiots," turned and fought.

But it was not in his methods, which others had discovered and practiced before him, that Hitler's originality lay; rather in the "demonic possessedness" with which, a nonentity out of nothingness, he began his mad career, swept millions along with him, and landed them and himself in utter catastrophe. Barroom debaters, even the brawling kind, do not usually have anything demonic about them, and are generally burdened with private lives that limit the time available for world conquest. This political tub-thumping, even though Hitler obviously takes it very seriously himself, is still mere frosting, like the pseudo-scientific learning that pornographic literature used to dress itself up in—and which was likewise often taken very seriously by the pornographers themselves. What is really and truly "demonic" about Hitler's wild, bloated effusions is not his political "views," his "world-historical" ruminations, or his nationalism, his arrogance, and his belief in force: but rather a reek of obscenity, of degenerate and perverted lewdness, that almost hits the reader of *Mein Kampf* in the face.

WHEN Hitler starts talking about "race" and "blood" every attempt at even the most primitive kind of rational argument ends, and he lapses into the language of sexual hallucination. To each his own: French literature has the Marquis de Sade; German literature, *Mein Kampf*. Its obsessive theme is embodied in the image of the black-haired demon and the blond virgin—the repressed wish-fulfillment dream of an unhappy adolescence. This nightmare of sex became the fixed point around which Hitler's image of the world revolved. His sick imagination saw nothing else during his years

in Vienna; later, the nightmare spread to become a glacial cap of madness covering the whole world.

One would have to quote endlessly from Hitler's remarks on syphilis, education, the tasks of the racist state, to grasp the whole clinical picture. He was a sick man for whom woman and sex remained always in the realm of sinful fantasy. If you want to find out Hitler's "mystery" or his wretched "demon," here it is, drawn by Hitler himself.

Hitler's central political idea is a vulgar rationalization of a sexual hallucination, an insane vision in which history, politics, and "the life struggle of races" unroll in images of copulation, promiscuity, blood defilement, natural selection, cross-breeding, bastardization, rape, and abduction—world history as a sexual orgy in which filthy and diabolic sub-humans lie in wait for blond maidens.

HITLER was thirty-five when he dictated *Mein Kampf*. When his "Table Talk"* was recorded, he was over fifty, the absolute dictator and supreme war commander of a country he had led into a war against the whole world—and yet nothing had really changed. True, the need to rationalize had now become dominant, and the telegraphic style in which his party comrade, Dr. Picker, recorded his utterances makes it impossible to taste the full flavor of his fantasies. But more than ever is human history seen in the context of a Darwinian animal world. "In reply to an objection by Reich Press Chief Dietrich, the Führer said: 'What is true of the wild horses is true of every community of living creatures that wishes to maintain itself in the world. If there is no bellwether the community is dissolved, atomized—everything comes to an end. It is for this reason that the apes, for example, trampled outsiders to death as aliens. And what is valid for the apes must be even more valid for human beings.'"

Hitler notes with satisfaction that the "quality" of the children around Berchtesgaden had already "improved" substantially

thanks to the "blood-freshening" activities of a division of the SS stationed there, who "take their task of bringing children into the world as a racial duty." "It is a practice which must be followed; to those districts in which a tendency towards degeneracy is apparent, we must send a body of elite troops, and in ten or twenty years' time the bloodstock will be improved out of all recognition." "In life, battle and love go hand in hand, and the inhibited little bourgeois must be content with the crumbs which remain." On the other hand, he noted with regret that the northern French had been perceptibly "Nordicized" by the occupation of their territory by German soldiers during the First World War; precious German blood should not be injected into alien races and allowed to filter up into their "leadership strata." This was the level on which things were discussed at Hitler's headquarters; ideas that should have remained lavatory jokes parade as eternal truths and divine revelation.

The fantasies of *Mein Kampf* had by now hardened into a systematic delirium. The "Table Talk" fully confirms what Rauschning, ten years before, had reported of Hitler's "secret teachings" about the "breeding of the superman." Publicly, Hitler had always spoken as if he considered the German people "Aryan," but within the circle of his worshippers he revealed the dark secret that the "Aryan" no longer existed—or perhaps not yet; he would have to be created by Hitler's personal intervention in a bungled Creation; state-directed biological mutations, "forced breeding," as animal-breeder Darré said, would be necessary. Their "Nordic essence" was to be extracted from the European peoples that lent themselves to the process. Eastern Europe and Russia were to be excluded from this forced "upward breeding," and illiteracy, plague, and poverty were to kill off superfluous slave populations to make room for the brave new asphalt world of the Nordic race. This was the deeper meaning, which Hitler alone perceived, of a war that was to mark a turning point in world history.

THE sources from which Hitler drew the materials for this monstrous structure lie in the past, and they have been distorted almost beyond recognition. All of German Romanticism, with its "instinctive" and

**Hitler's Secret Conversations 1941-1944*. With an Introductory Essay by H. R. Trevor-Roper. Farrar, Straus and Young, 597 pp., \$6.50. This selection overlaps with, but is somewhat different from that published in the original German which Francis Golffing reviewed in these pages in February 1953.

"blood" definitions of race, nation, and culture—a whole tradition of operative Germanness—emptied itself into this spiritual swamp.

Nor did these pathological fantasies remain mere theory; in Auschwitz and Maidanek the "final solution of the Jewish question" was "achieved" in millionfold murder. The euthanasia program for the extermination of the mentally ill, and of "inferior" human specimens in general, was set in motion by Hitler's decree on the first day of the war; in the conquered territories of the East the *Einsatzgruppen* set out to exterminate or tread down "slave peoples" with systematic brutality. The Race and Resettlement Bureau of the SS catalogued with pedantic minuteness the breeding value (estimated down to decimal points) of hundreds of thousands of "resettled" people who were to be employed for racial breeding in the "German resettlement area"; in Poland, Holland, and Norway the rounding up had already begun of those whose blood was considered suitable for the same purpose in Himmler's proposed new German cities. Never did lunacy become world history on such a scale.

HITLER's early life was that of a lonely, orphaned, unhappy, rootless man, unsuccessful in every human sphere, who had never found a single healthy or genuine human contact, or a task or milieu of his own; who, in his own growing isolation from humanity, refused, out of anxiety, to show himself to anyone except in the pose of a lonely and misunderstood genius. This panicky refusal to meet anyone on an equal plane without posturing, his systematic avoidance of all confrontation, discussion, examination, or self-examination, the flight from himself into an unreal world of uninterrupted monologues where he could hide his inner emptiness—all this remained with Hitler until the end of his life.

He had thanked God on his knees for the coming of war in 1914, but here, too, the political reasons he cites are grotesque and twisted rationalizations of a purely personal joy in the arrival of a "mass experience" that would at last give his life some meaning. But even this "mass experience" remained as inwardly empty as the clichés to which his description of this "greatest and most unforgettable time of my earthly life,"

besides which "everything in the past was reduced to mere nothingness," are limited. In the trenches too he sat apart, as once he had sat "somewhere apart," as he himself said, among the Viennese building workers at the midday break. The other soldiers had homes, families, wives, wrote and received letters, yearned for their old lives—he had no one, and his outburst of rage in *Mein Kampf* against the "foolish letters of the German women" which "demoralized the front," "this poison manufactured by thoughtless wives at home," is laden with hate and envy. For him—homeless, without real education or calling, without a goal—civilian life meant a return to nothingness. What was he good for? In ordinary times, perhaps, he could have become preacher of some eccentric sect (even in his last years, between critical military decisions, he would long-windedly lecture his entourage on vegetarianism, the harmfulness of alcohol and tobacco, and Hörbiger's theories about the glacial age). But these were not ordinary times. The age of the scabrous bohemian hero had dawned, the age of the *ratés*, of the failures.

IN THE slowly dissolving German army in post-Armistice Munich, commanded by Republic-hating officers who were later to make up the *Freikorps*, all the irreconcilables, at odds with God and the world and thirsting for national revenge, tried to scrape along in a provisional military life. Here the discharged Adolf Hitler, who did not know what was to become of him, likewise nursed his resentment and despair. In a course on "national thinking" organized on the initiative of Captain Roehm, he found his political finishing school; one need look no further for the sources of his "doctrines," even if he himself, in *Mein Kampf*, dates his political enlightenment a decade or two back. Here, in the company of men of like fate and outlook, he acquired the whole arsenal of nationalist slogans he was to draw on for the rest of his career: the "stab-in-the-back" lie, the betrayal by the "Jewish-Marxist November criminals," the "shame of Versailles," "racial thinking"—the whole set of inflammatory platitudes of the extreme German right.

In this hothouse atmosphere his hour ripened. At last, in a discussion in which "one of the participants thought it necessary to break a lance for the Jews," the spirit

came upon him, and "aroused," he uttered aloud that hatred of the Jewish "corrupter of the people" which had fermented within him for so long. The audience, the atmosphere, the theme—everything came together. What was lowest in him poured forth, and it spoke to what was lowest in his listeners; the contact was made—he was a speaker! His talent had been discovered. "The result . . . was that I was assigned, a few days later, to serve as a so-called 'educational officer' with a Munich regiment."

In his capacity as nationalist propagandist among troops, and as "information agent" for what was to become the "Black Reichswehr," he was sent as a political observer to a meeting of the newly founded German Workers party, one of the extremist nationalist organizations then springing up like mushrooms from the soil of Munich, and with his oratorical conquest of its seven members, Hitler began his conquest of the world. The remaining twenty years of his life were to be one long monologue before a slowly swelling audience, a monologue half-German, screaming, inarticulate, but aimed unerringly at every evil instinct in his fellow men. With jubilation, he noted the effect of his first public speech before an audience of one hundred and eleven people: "What I had before simply felt internally, without knowing it in any way, had now been proved by reality: I could speak! After thirty minutes the people in the little room had been electrified. . . ."

From this to the mass frenzies of Nuremberg, the rest of Hitler's career is one single, continuous intensification of this orgy of mass oratory, the first and only form of human contact he had ever known, and to which, when he had once tasted it, he returned obsessively like an addict to his drug. He had nothing but his burning hatred and his pathological obsessions, but it was clear now that this was enough to bring under his spell hundreds, then thousands, then hundreds of thousands of others who likewise possessed nothing else. He, who possessed no one, could possess masses; he, who could not deal with his fellow man as an individual, could "electrify" him as part of a crowd, dehumanize him, work him up into raving excitement and (in his own words) "forward-driving hysteria."

The mass meeting became the realization

of his fantasies, the witches' sabbath over which he ruled, released at last from the inner prison of his individuality and carried away by the mass delirium he himself evoked. The first audiences he addressed had been composed only of men; now the women came, too, the elderly, "motherly friends" who introduced the unmannerly "little wolf" to society, the hysterical hero-worshippers who instinctively divined the little boy imprisoned within the great man; the "convulsion squad" of the mass meetings, whom his presence sent into hysterical fits.

What Hitler said hardly mattered and he learned quickly, indeed, to alter his rationalizations according to his audience. A torrent of pathologically erotic hatred, with dark affect-laden verbal symbols—"disgrace," "blood," "shame," "Jew," "race," "sin"—washed over his audience and transformed it into a mass bereft of its senses.

HE TALKED himself into fame, he talked himself into power, he talked himself into war, and he talked himself into disaster. Did he know what he was doing? Nowhere can it be shown that his political aims, his ideas about the future, consisted of anything but the marching, the *heiling*, the flags and the torches of the huge crowds straining up to him. And as the last event in the program of delirium, there came the vision of a collectively organized procreation of the Nordic superman out of test tubes of sacred blood, a vision embodied in the elite columns of the SS as they marched in to the strains of *Parsifal*. His speeches during the second half of the war, with Germany already on the slope of catastrophe, show an absolute incapacity to see the world war he had called down upon Germany in any other perspective but that of his early struggles and oratorical triumphs, the meeting-hall brawls and the election campaigns in which he by fanatical energy—ten or more election speeches a day—had first shown his power.

Just as all the terms he, and his admirers, found for his special talent for mass suggestion—sleepwalking, hypnosis, animal magnetism—point towards the realm of hysteria, so his career, magnified by the power he wielded, reminds one of a hysterical woman who, having once discovered she could always get her way by nervous attacks and fits of screaming, forever afterwards responds

to all contradiction or resistance with a nervous collapse. Hitler's tantrums were worked up and heightened systematically once experience had demonstrated their effect; they were synthetic, consciously induced. The fit of rage turned on and off at will, the rug-chewing became an instrument to be manipulated, a weapon in the struggle for power within the party, a diplomatic arm, finally a weapon to be used in the supreme direction of war—and even in the disastrous last months of his life, he found that these fits of rage which no one dared contradict could make possible, if not the impossible, then at least the insane. (What he spoke came to pass: the national revolution, the Greater German Reich, the subjugation of Europe, the pogroms, the massacres, the downfall of the world—the world around him became putty in his hands, and confirmed his madness.) Perhaps Hitler's real biography is nothing but this single, endless, obsessive monologue, a waking dream outside real life, and outside what had hitherto been called history. When he was not making a speech he fell back into a brooding half-sleep, abandoned by the demon, incapable of action or decision, buried in himself—*post coitum triste*. Perhaps that discrepancy with which his biographers struggle—between the monstrous shadow he cast over world history and the person that produced it—is nothing but the discrepancy between a medium's state of excitement and his relapse into the apathy of his own insignificant individuality.

BUT here the problem of Hitler ends, and becomes the problem of the materials out of which he built his empire.

Hitler did not create the "mass soul" that gave itself up to him; it fell to him because he was made in its image. Certainly, all the external conditions for this explosion of failure, rootlessness, and long-fermented hatred were already present in Germany and Germans: the collapse of the Kaiser's Reich, the great lie of the "stab in the back" that from the beginning poisoned the development of the Weimar Republic, the smoldering atmosphere of chauvinist conspiracy, the inflation, the declassing of the middle classes, the Great Depression and its despair, the secret jockeying for power amid political chaos. These are recorded in both biographies with great and depressing con-

scientiousness. As Bullock rightly points out in his "Epilogue": "Hitler, indeed, was a European, no less than a German phenomenon. The conditions and the state of mind which he exploited, the *malaise* of which he was the symptom, were not confined to one country, although they were more strongly marked in Germany than anywhere else. . . . He was in revolt against 'the System' not just in Germany but in Europe, against that liberal bourgeois order, symbolized for him in the Vienna which had once rejected him. To destroy this was his mission, the mission in which he never ceased to believe; and in this, the most deeply felt of his purposes, he did not fail. . . ."

European in this sense all the epiphenomena of the Third Reich—the crisis of society and civilization, the "masses," the total state, the nihilism—certainly were. Nonetheless, it would be idle to attempt to argue away the unmistakable *Germanness* of the phenomenon of Adolf Hitler and of the specific spirit he stamped on his Reich, that sick, obscene savagery which had no parallel in Fascism, Bolshevism, or any of the other totalitarian movements. The foul instincts that Hitler's blood cult conjured to the surface rose from the depths of a sour, spectral, airless, brooding psyche, and that psyche was an aspect peculiar to the "German nature" to which Hitler could appeal with such murderous success—an aspect the rest of the world viewed with startled incomprehension.

The Third Reich contained other impulses besides this nightmare. Once set in motion, it had the force to move unswervingly to a repetition, ten times as disastrous, of the First World War—but it was not in this that the ghastly originality of Hitler's Third Reich lay. The elevation of certain depraved fantasies—diseased products of a sick mind such as could conceive Auschwitz, Maidanek, and the human stock-breeding files of the Bureau of Race and Resettlement—into the official philosophy of a civilized nation: this was what was original and unique in Hitler's achievement. It was this that marked an absolute zero in human history, far below all barbarism, below all horrors and crimes of war and revolution, below Stalin's slave camps. The nightmare has vanished, but who can wonder that its neighbors and witnesses still feel the horror of it in their bones?